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Beyond The Fall Getaway

BY RANDY STERN

There are two ways to do a fall getaway.

One, is to simply go away. You, your spouse or partner, your family, your friends…just getting away from it all. Simply unplugging from work, from life…and enjoying the time of your life.

Let me call out something here. You're not exactly unplugged. Not if you post your getaway photos on social media. Not that it's a bad thing, right?

My type of getaway has a work component to it. Not exactly a business trip, but one where you are considered part of the journey.

For the past several years, I embarked on these journeys with our community in mind. These trips have mostly been a collaborative effort with an automotive manufacturer, their localized agency, and a few ideas thrown around towards what you're about to read later on in this magazine (or online on our website or via social media).

These road trips that I have written for in *Lavender* were influenced by a book I read some decades ago. Neil Miller's *In Search of Gay America: Women and Men in a Time of Change* gave us a glimpse of how a Boston-based LGBTQ journalist found himself on a road trip across the Upper Midwest – and other parts of the country – to find people like us at a time where our visibility was not exactly where it is today. This book was a chronicle in discovering our communities in late 1980s – right in the middle of the AIDS Crisis. I suggest you find a copy and read it to understand where this is all coming from.

Now, consider how we have evolved since the days when Miller's book was written. Think about how many LGBTQ Pride celebrations we already had – and still have on the calendar. After the publication of our Small Town and Community Pride issue, we received information on more than a half-dozen additional events across Minnesota and beyond our state lines.

Think about how many smaller communities now have LGBTQ resources that did not exist until even before the COVID-19 Pandemic. I'd bet that Miller never thought this would happen when he traversed across Minnesota and the Dakotas some 30-plus years ago.

With that said, this issue has some journeys for you to take. We celebrate Duluth-Superior Pride with some suggestions of what to do and where to go, while you're in the Twin Ports. Then, we show you a section of the Mississippi River often forgotten by many travelers and what we found along the way. Add some extra stops along Kentucky's Bourbon Trail, and Florida's fabulous Palm Beach. Plus, we add to your Fall Getaways soundtrack the music of LGBTQ Country artist Brandon Stansell, who is performing in Minneapolis this coming weekend!

With Miller's book as inspiration, I use another guiding principle in crafting these travel stories: To find intelligent LGBTQ life in other places. So far, I have been successful.

These communities are worth the drive – or, flight. They deserve a visit, even if there is not a Pride celebration to attend. ∎

OUR LAVENDER | A WORD IN EDGEWISE

"Sweat": And It Has Ever Been

BY E.B. BOATNER

The end may come in the blink of an eye–tsunami, drunk driver, infarct. Sometimes, equally devastating, it creeps up on little cat feet.

Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*, concerns one of the latter, a surgical biopsy of the fate of Reading, Pennsylvania, and its union mill and factory workers. Their Reading railroad (of Monopoly fame) once moved vast quantities of textiles steel products, auto parts to become Pennsylvania's fourth largest city. Then, incrementally, industrial evolution brought globalization while NAFTA created social and economic fissures. Reading dropped from 32nd in residents living in poverty to #1. A Google click today: over 41 percent.

Nottage's two years of research, interviewing a range of Reading citizens, provided the background and dialogue for *Sweat*, sharpened by her own lyrical arrangement. The dialogue, even at its fiercest, fairly sings.

Action takes place primarily in a local bar, run, not owned, by Stan, an older, former worker sidelined by a crippling on-the-job injury. He's seen it all, strives to add balance. His customers include besties Tracey (white) and Cynthia (black) and the women that gather with them to drink, kvetch, celebrate birthdays. Their sons, Jason and Chris, are pals, who, after an incident we see played out later, have been in prison since 2000. Oscar, Hispanic, is an ignored bar back, removing empties, restocking the full, wiping tables, endlessly sweeping.

As the action shifts between 2000 to 2008, moving banners overhead flash the news of the times. Curtain rises in 2008 as a parole officer talks separately with Jason and Chris, as they're released. They first meet again back in Reading.

Back in 2000, Cynthia and Tracey seek promotion. Cynthia is chosen as the shop floor supervisor. She sees it as an affirmation of her worth, while Tracey and others see it as betrayal. The union is slipping, companies are cutting wages and benefits. Cynthia stresses she wants to help fellow workers, urging them to accept the new conditions; Stan warns, "You could wake up tomorrow and all your jobs would be in Mexico." Their words fall on deaf ears. Wokers refuse the terms, go on strike, are locked out.

In 2008, the young men return and meet again, but Reading has become a foreign town; economic, social tectonic plates have shifted. New technologies, demographics, foreign markets and NAFTA have arrived. Now jobless, adrift, local people fall prey to drugs and alcohol, angry and afraid they turn on one another. Gone is their pride in being one in a long line of family workers, poor perhaps but with a certain future. Now Tracey cries, "Do you know what it's like to get up and have no place to go?"

Jason and Chris find their bar now managed by Oscar, decked out in new, trendy trappings and were shown, at last, the results of the tragic event that occasioned their prison sentences; a moving scene that yet offers some possibility of resolution for Cynthia, Tracey, and the others.

Sweat is mightily relevant today. As has happened for millennia, those with power use those who have none to divide and conquer. Factory owners, too, face losses and the changes of the new order, but their greater resources allow many to flee to sunnier climes, and cheaper, non-union labor.

A brilliant, spot-on cast, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play–don't miss *Sweat*. Now at the Guthrie through August 21. ∎

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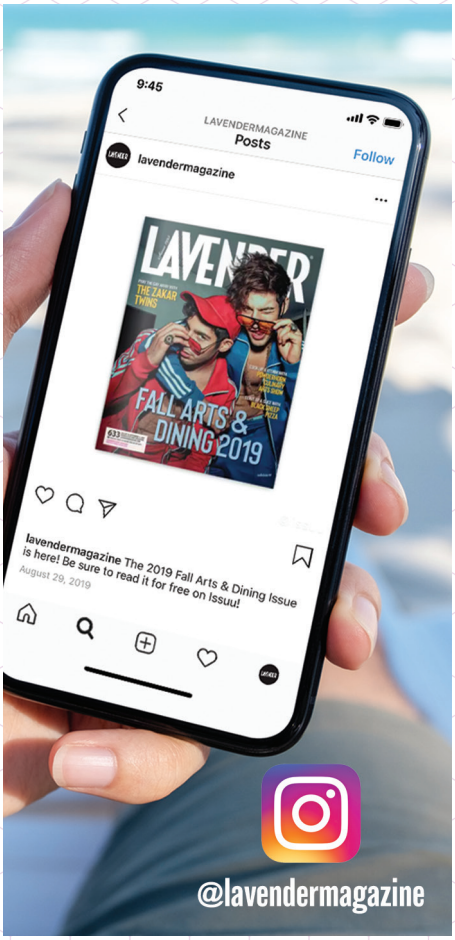
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Roam Town Hero

Singer Brandon Stansell Brings His Country Sound to the Twin Cities

BY TERRANCE GRIEP

"I was in the airport, standing in line, ready to board my flight home, and I just started openly weeping," Brandon Stansell remembers. "I think the people around me thought, 'Oh, my God–who's this freak that is just awkwardly crying as he's boarding the plane?'"

The answer to that wholly reasonable question is simplicity on display: the freak was Brandon Stansell himself, of course, rising country music star who, according to his own website, "has come to occupy a unique space in country music. He has been an ardent advocate for the queer community and the advancement of LGBTQ artists in the still widely conservative genre."

Photo by The Riker Brothers

As for the awkwardly crying part, well, that's easy to explain, too: it was the fault of Chely Wright–yeah, *that* Chely Wright, *the* Chely Wright, the pioneer who risked her down-from-the-mountain music career by coming out as lesbian in 2010, before anyone else, becoming fairy godmother of all things country queer in the glittery process.

It wasn't a Chely Wright song that made Brandon Stansell go all rustic emo in the line at the airport, though—it was a Chely Wright text congratulating the son of Chattanooga on the video supporting his single "Hometown."

"We shot this video, and Country Music Television decided to premiere it, and it was not the first time that a queer artist had something in that space, but it was the first time that a queer person could ever see a story like theirs in that space," Stansell recounts. "It was important to me and something I never thought that it would be me doing." In fact, the 2017 release of "Hometown" represented the first leg of a journey that would take Stansell further than any passenger jet ever could.

But, an electronic attaboy from Chely Wright notwithstanding, the ticket for the journey came at a steep price. "That video was obviously a big step up for me, but it was a hard thing to make," Stansell admits. "It was a four or five minute version of my coming out story. So, it was a tough thing to make and a tough thing to write."

As tough as it was, the composing wasn't the toughest part. "Actually, I had written the song years before we actually ended up putting it out," says Stansell. "I had shelved it just because felt like no one would ever find themselves in it, and turns out I was very wrong."

Many LGBTQ folk, old and young, suffering silently while living in the Bible Belt, had been given voice by Stansell's work. "I grew up in Tennessee and in the Southern Baptist church," he recalls. "These are the people that tell you that all sins are equal unless you're gay. Then you've just hit the lottery."

The voice Stansell supplied the silent minority was–naturally, literally–his own. Remembering his gay adolescence in the American South, he says, "It was the thing I was most ashamed of, and to fast forward twenty years, and for me to be that person, to be not only out, but an advocate for people like me and a voice in this space where there weren't people like me–that shocked a lot of people, but I think more than anyone, it shocked me."

The journey continued, as Stansell kept making music within his country niche. In 2021, he released an EP (or Extended Player), *This Must Be Place*. That effort was eventually supplemented earlier this summer by six songs, which turned it into an LP (or Long Player, which is longer than the longer-sounding Extended Player).

Perhaps being open about his sexuality left Stansell open to broader musical influences on this latest project. "I love country music, but I have a lot of other inspirations, too, that fall outside of the country world," he notes. "I'm a child of the Eighties. I had always been drawn to this kind of Eighties feel. These big synth sounds and melodies."

Still, the walls of the genre kept Stansell's creativity in check…for a while, anyway. As he puts it, "I finally just threw my hands up and said, 'You know what? I'm going to make the music I want to make, and it's just going to be what it is. If it's country enough for country radio or CMT, or the people in Nashville that absorb country music, great. If not, great. It'll find the people it's supposed to.'"

If *This Must Be The Place* is any indicator, LGBTQ Pride and creative pride have become one and the same for Stansell. "I couldn't be more proud of this thing, because it is the first time I felt like it's exactly what I wanted it to be, and I wouldn't change a thing about it," the singer proclaims. "I'm so proud of the way that it came out."

A new album means a new tour, one that includes a new destination, a new this-must-be-the-place place. "I've never played in Minneapolis before," Stansell confesses. "I was itching to get there." That geographic itch will be scratched on August 28, 2022, when Brandon Stansell's journey wends its way into Mill City's Lush Lounge and Theater. "Everything is really small, purposefully," Stansell says of all of the venues on his current tour. "We wanted to keep it an acoustic, intimate feel."

The journey of Brandon Stansell might have started with tears in an airport, but it'll culminate in the City of Lakes…with the opposite of tears. "I'm so excited to take this show on the road," Brandon Stansell affirms. "I'm excited to get out there and play. I'm excited Minneapolis is the last stop. I'm excited to share my songs with the people in Minnesota. We're coming for you." ▮

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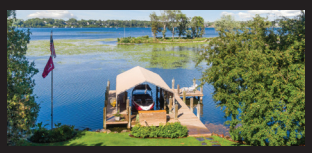

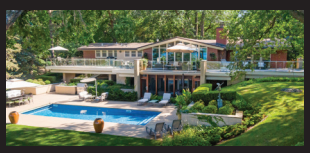

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A Visitor's Guide to Duluth-Superior Pride Weekend

BY HOLLY PETERSON

Halibut. Photo courtesy of The Boat Club

There is nothing better than a trip to Northern Minnesota in the late summer and early fall. If the promise of cool breezes and changing leaves is not enough to convince you to get out of the Twin Cities this September, maybe this will: the Twin Ports area is hosting the Duluth-Superior Pride Festival from September 1-4. All the information that you need to make the most out of the weekend is available on their website (duluthsuperiorpride.com), but we recommend kicking off the weekend with the *Lavender*-sponsored Happy Hour at Canal Park Brewery at 5:30 on Friday, September 2.

There are so many events that we are excited about: Party X at Duluth Flame Nightclub (also on Friday night); Saturday's day-long festival at Bayfront Festival Park; Sunday's Pride Parade in Superior, Wisconsin; an all-ages drag show on Monday afternoon; and so much more. In addition to all the events, Duluth itself is full of great food and amazing views. The following are some of our favorite options.

The Boat Club

The Boat Club is owned by couple Jason Vincent and Jeff Anderson and is known for its intimate ambiance and delicious food. As part of the Pride festivities, The Boat Club is hosting a comedy show on Friday at 7 PM. While you enjoy the show, we recommend sipping on a Lobster Bloody Mary. This loaded cocktail has won one of the Best Bloodies in the Northland two years in a row and it is not hard to see why. The Lobster Bloody is a thing of beauty: garnished with a petite lobster tail, Sriracha maple bacon, and more. The Grilled Halibut is also a popular menu item. Flown in directly from Alaska on a weekly basis, the halibut is served with ginger-infused rice and pineapple and jalapeno salsa.

Photo courtesy of Al Sarai's Table

"As a side-note, I have been supporting Pride for years, even before we owned restaurants," says Anderson, "I served as Duluth's first openly LGBT city councilor and successfully passed Minnesota's second Domestic Partnership Registry in Duluth back in 2009." This involvement is still going strong, even if it has shifted focus a bit now that Anderson and his husband are restauranteurs. "We sponsor D/S Pride each year by catering the Mayor's Welcome Reception," says Jeff. Check that out on Thursday night.

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Chester Creek Falls. Photo courtesy of BigStock/johnsroad7

Chester Creek Hiking Trails

It is no secret that there is a lot of natural beauty in Duluth, but the trails around Chester Creek are truly a diamond in the rough. Located directly in the city (the trailhead is at 14th Ave East and 4th St), this hike is the best of both worlds: it is both well-traveled and full of rugged, scenic views. Because there are trails on both sides of the creek and many convenient crossing points, hikers can easily customize the hike to their ideal loop length. Wake up early and enjoy the trail before breakfast at the nearby favorite Sara's Table (more on that below!) or take a break from the official festivities and recenter with a little time in nature.

At Sara's Table – Casual Restaurant

At Sara's Table, owned by *Lavender* Magazine Community Award winners Barb Neubert and Carla Blumberg, has been a beloved part of the Chester Park Neighborhood since 2002. In the last couple of decades, its owners have perfected classic American staples like pancakes and hamburgers – as well as several favorite vegan dishes. "Mostly people come here for hangovers and special date dinners," laughs Blumberg. This fall At Sara's Table will be introducing a new menu – including both new food items and some delightful Minnesota wines.

At Sara's Table has always had a dual mission: making great food and being good neighbors. "We go out of our way to try to be good community citizens," says Blumberg, "We've had a zillion fundraisers." These fundraisers benefit organizations like Together for Youth, which is a group that supports LGBTQ Teens. Together Neubert and Blumberg have built a local establishment with a spacious meeting room, a dog-friendly deck, a welcoming ambiance, and, most importantly: tasty, regionally based food.

1902 E 8th St,
Duluth, MN 55812
Monday – Saturday from 8 AM – 9 PM
Sunday from 8 AM – 3 PM

Duluth Coffee Company

Duluth Coffee Company has become a staple for a reason – and it is not just owner Eric Faust's commitment to ethically sourced coffees. What started as a roasting project out of his garage quickly developed into a popular local coffee shop and distributor. Now, staying true to the principles and passion that got him started originally, Faust and his team work to "source, roast, and craft coffee with integrity and intentionality." With artfully poured lattes, perfectly roasted beans, and a convenient downtown location, Duluth Coffee Company is the place to grab your iced latte before you head into the Pride festivities. As a fun perk, Duluth Coffee Company is offering Pride-goers a discount on a beverage over Pride weekend. All you have to do is mention this article when ordering.

105 E Superior St,
Duluth, MN 55802
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Thursday – Friday from 7 AM – 4 PM

Enger Tower and Park

Enger Tower Park is another fun, outdoorsy stop for when you need a moment away from it all. Built on an impressive hill once called "Grand Mountain", Enger Tower is 80 feet tall and has more than one hundred steps from top to bottom. This exhausting but completely worthwhile climb rewards every stair stepper with a breathtaking view of the Aerial Lift Bridge. For those who are unable or uninterested in the climb, there is also a handicap-accessible overlook that offers a similarly impressive view. Make sure you take a moment to find the Peace Bell in the park, which was gifted to Duluth by its sister city Ohara-Isumi.

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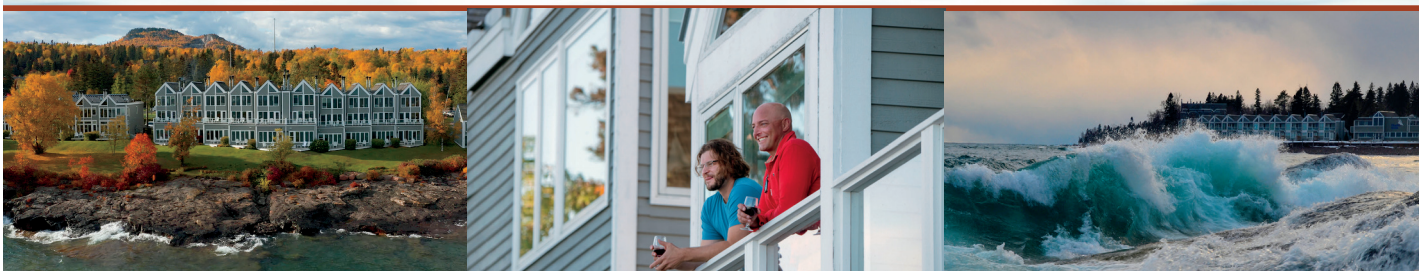

Hannah Lowen pours a tasting flight at New Riff Distilling. Photos by Carla Waldemar

Come Find Bourbon!

BY CARLA WALDEMAR

What's in your glass, you spirits sippers and cocktail connoisseurs? If you're on-trend today (and pampering your palate), it's Bourbon. And where was Bourbon born? Northern Kentucky.

Its new "Come Find Bourbon" campaign is your open invitation to savor it in three towns that best showcase the spirit: Covington, spotlighting what's new and trendy; Frankfort, home of Buffalo Trace, the oldest continuously operating distillery in the USA; and Bardstown, Bourbon's birthplace.

Leaving the classy new Hotel Covington, I spot decorated Bourbon barrels lining the city's streets, like plaster cows do in Chicago. My destination: New Riff Distilling, launched in 2014 with a mission to be "one of the greatest of small distilleries, with independent ownership."

Did the world need yet-another Bourbon distillery? Sure! "There are many in Kentucky, but not in Northern Kentucky, and we're just across the river from Cincinnati, Ohio, 'the biggest town in Kentucky'" laughs Hannah Lowen, Vice President of Operations of New Riff Distilling, who lives nearby with her wife and daughter. "It's called New Riff after a guitar riff—focused on innovation. Fresh eyes." We sip and savor its warm, open whiskey; a big, spicy malted rye: and its best-selling single-barrel Bourbon.

Lunchtime lures us to the German-born Mainstrasse neighborhood, where Otto's menu spotlights a fried green tomato BLT and a riff on the traditional Hot Brown turkey sandwich. Then it's off to Second Sight Spirits. Co-owner Carus Waggoner began fooling around with fermenting in his Las Vegas apartment, experimenting on his pals in Cirque du Soleil. Moving back to Kentucky, he and a partner opened the works in 2015 as a contrast to the "worship of dead old men" typical on Bourbon labels.

Carus tells his story from a tiny stage—complete with velvet curtains and footlights, rigged Rube Goldberg- style with parts salvaged from Home Depot. He got his start by building a still from junk he found on Craigslist. I'm prepared to spit my sips into a potted plant, but surprise: his rums and moonshine, as well as Oak Eye Bourbon, deserve applause. (Here's hoping it's poured at Covington's LGBTQ bars: Lil's, Rosie's and Bar 32.)

After dinner at Purple Poulet, feasting on (natch) Southern fried chicken, I scoot over for a nightcap at Prohibition Bourbon Bar (reservations required), offering the largest collection (6,437) of Bourbons in, ahem, the entire world. It's owned by Kim and Peter Newberry, Bourbon raconteurs par excellence and ultra-friendly to boot: "If you're here, you're part of our family."

Heading south to Frankfort and its primo distillery, Buffalo Trace, we mirror the Wise Men following the Biblical star. BT is the most-awarded distillery in the world, doing what they're best at for over 200 years. Tours and tastings are by appointment; nonetheless, expect a line

Buffalo Trace Distillery - the most award-winning distillery in the world, in Business over 200 years

Frankfort, KY - direction post to nearby distilleries

that's longer than an airport queue. Its Bourbon brands range from Eagle Run to the iconic Pappy van Winkle—and BT makes vodka, too—"just because we can."

"Use the 1995 Buffalo Trace small batch as a mixer or everyday pour," instructs tour guide Scott. "Proceed to the 10-year-old Eagle Rock with its long, sweet finish. Then try the Sazarac Rye over ice. The shelf life of Buffalo Trace is 20 years, but once open, six months. Use it also in frosting banana bread, or," he chuckles, "over cereal."

Lunch at Woodward Brewery, aside the Kentucky River, proves that Kentuckians know a thing or two about fine brews, too. Then jump aboard the nearby Bourbon Boat to cruise the river (April 15-November 15), spotting herons, eagles, duck and catfish while Captain Randy narrates about "the river that made Bourbon" before the days of trucks and trains.

Frankfort, up next, boasts the gorgeous Old State Capitol as the anchor of its historic district, where, as signs instruct—while George Washington never slept here—the Marquis de Lafayette did. Visit the gravestone of Daniel Boone, the cache of indie shops along Broadway, and B's Bakery for breakfast. Owner Beth Carter has catered for the Le Mans Race in France, the Taylor Swift tour, the Food Network, Buffalo Trace and the governor. Plus moi.

Frankfort boasts two LGBTQ Prides per year: June and October. Also check out NKYPride-center.org.

Bardstown, to the southwest, has been named "most beautiful small town in America" by Rand McNally and USA Today. Not incidentally, it boasts 11 distilleries within 16 miles. Our pick this morning is Bardstown Bourbon Company, the new kid (2014) on the block. Its architecturally stunning, Napa-like campus is ground zero for its custom-distillation thrust—a niche that allows companies (or individuals)

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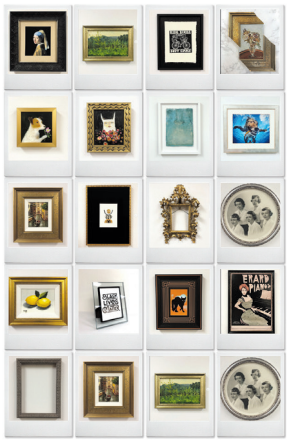

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Sassafras Punch & Watermelon Splash cocktails at Logstill Distillery

to create their own Bourbon profiles. It has produced 130,000 barrels for 30 companies, making it the fastest-growing brand ever, they say. Enjoy a Raspberry Bourbon slushie while awaiting the start of your chosen tour (no walk-ins; reservations run 3-6 months out), then proceed to a rickhouse (storehouse) to sneak sips from barrels that will be released next year.

After lunch in its stylish café (steak frites for my companion, grilled Caesar for me), we hit the road to investigate Log Still, which started production in 2018 under the eye of owner Wally Dant on its 350 acres, which also boasts a concert amphitheater and classy bar and restaurant, where Chef David sent out bites including a mini Hot Brown; devilled egg topped with pickled shrimp; and pimento cheese tart. Meanwhile bartender Tara plied us with her own inventions: Sassafras Punch (sassafras tea, lemon, maple syrup, Bourbon) and Watermelon Splash (gin, watermelon, pineapple).

Bardstown, my final stop, sits at the center of Civil War history. One museum details a significant battle here, while another showcases women in the Civil War (spies, soldiers in disguise, and Army nurses). Visit, too, My Old Kentucky Home, the gracious plantation manse which Stephen Foster commemorated in his beloved ballad.

On to Heaven Hill and its Connoisseur Whiskey Tour, one of several offered here, preceded by a film explaining barrel-making. HH, the second-largest distillery in the world, has been owned by the same family since its launch in 1935. Today we tasted five of its brands, ranging from Elijah Craig to a 7-year Heaven Hill to the special 10-year Heritage.

Before I head home via a non-stop Sun Country flight, time for one final tour—Luxe Row, founded in 2018, and one of the most modern distilleries in both style and operation. For more information, visit www.comefindbourbon.com and start sipping. ▮

Rickhouse at The Bardstown Bourbon Co.

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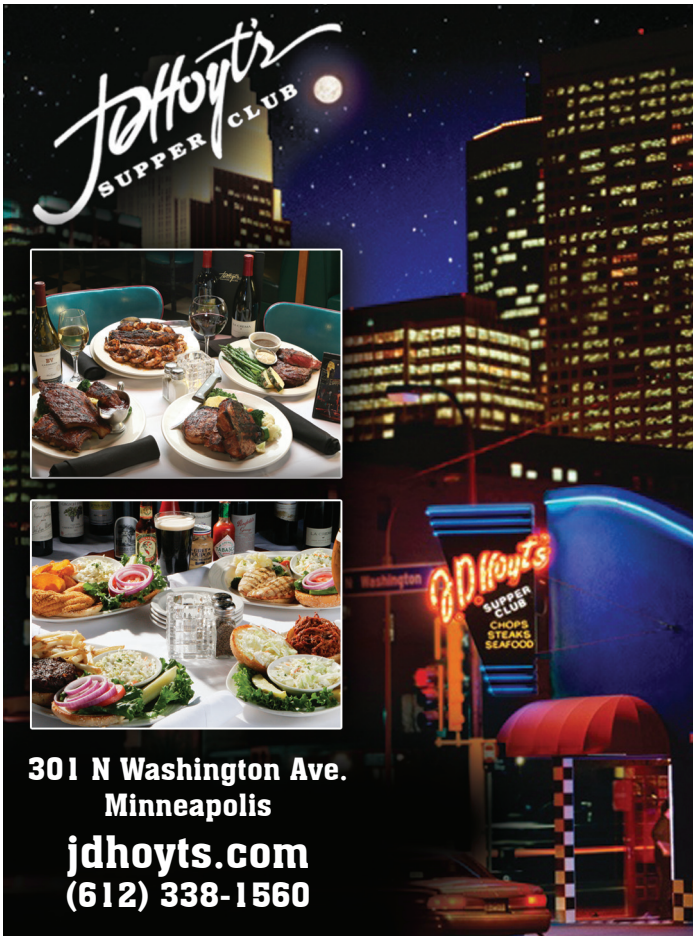
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Pride Journey: Palm Beach

BY JOEY AMATO

Hilton West Palm Beach. Photos by Joey Amato

On my recent visit to The Palm Beaches, I wanted to explore parts of the region I hadn't had the chance to visit when I lived in the area a little of a decade ago. Palm Beach County encompassed dozens of cities and towns, each with its own unique charm and attractions. While most people think of Florida's beaches as the main attraction in the Sunshine State, Palm Beach County stretches all the way to the Everglades in the west and has developed into one of the top agri-tourism destinations in the country.

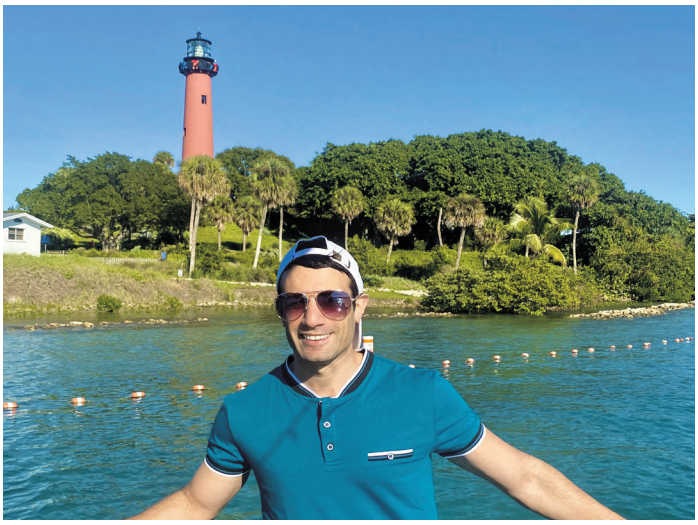
I began my trip in Delray Beach, the town I used to live in. One of Delray Beach's hidden gems is Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens. Guests get to experience authentic Japanese culture and stroll through acres of lush trails transporting them to a different land. I didn't even feel as if I was in Florida as I spent time at the reflection pond, the bamboo forest, or the old museum. While in Delray Beach, head to the Pineapple Grove arts district, a stretch of downtown devoted to art galleries, cafes, and boutiques. Swing by City Oysteron Atlantic Avenue for lunch and try order the Lobster Roll. You will not be disappointed.

From Delray Beach, head north on I-95 – or jump on the Tri-Rail to West Palm Beach and visit the Norton Museum of Art. During my visit, the museum was exhibiting Origin Stories: Photography of Africa and Its Diaspora, a collection that confronts the intertwined relationship between identity and colonialism in communities across the African continent. The museum also contains a permanent collection of Asian and European artwork.

After the museum, take a walk along Clamatis street, the dining and entertainment hub of West Palm Beach or journey over to Palm Beach Island, where the world's wealthiest people go to play during the winter months. Mansions and sprawling estates surround the island which includes many historic properties including the Flagler Museum, The Breakers and Mar-a-Lago, which was originally built for cereal company heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post.

There are many hotels located on Palm Beach, but they can get a bit pricey depending on the time of year you visit. A great option is the Hilton West Palm Beach, located across the street from Rosemary Square and within walking distance to many of the area's main attractions. The luxurious property features a grand lobby, large fitness center and massive outdoor pool, perfect for a nice relaxing dip after a long day of sightseeing.

Grab dinner at Table 26, one of West Palm Beach's most popular LGBTQ-owned restaurants. My guest and I began our meal with the Squash Blossoms and Burrata & Tomato salad, a simple yet delicious selection that is always a favorite of mine. For dinner, we wanted to order something a little on the lighter side, so we opted for the Zucchini pasta prepared with roasted heirloom tomatoes, pine nuts, basil pesto and shaved parmesan. If you are in the mood to grab some cocktails, head to The Mad Hatter lounge located in Lake Worth, a town known for its thriving LGBTQ culture. Lake Worth is also home to Compass, the area's LGBTQ community center.



Joey with the Jupiter Lighthouse

After grabbing a morning coffee, head to Jupiter, about a 20-minute drive north from the hotel to the Busch Wildlife Sanctuary. The free attraction relies on donations to help maintain the property and support its animals. Last year alone, the sanctuary cared for over 6,000 animals who arrived to the facility, which was established to care for sick, injured and orphaned wild animals, while promoting wildlife and habitat conservation. All of the animals at Busch Wildlife Sanctuary are native to Florida.

While in Jupiter, head to Lucky Shuck for lunch and grab a table with a view of the intracoastal waterway. The restaurant offers wonderful service, fresh and simple food, and a relaxed island time environment. I decided to try the Ceviche Trio, prepared three different ways and was so surprised

Continue on page 22

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Norton Museum

at the differences between each of the preparations. For dessert – yes, I had dessert for lunch – try the Key Lime pie served with a coconut meringue and passion fruit glaze. It was one of the most delicious items I had on my entire visit. After lunch, jump on the Love Street Outdoor Center PonTiki Cruise a few steps from the restaurant, for a 30-minute or hour-long cruise around Jupiter inlet before heading back to the Hilton for some R&R before dinner.

Although it is easy to navigate West Palm Beach via public transportation, I would recommend renting a car if you really want to explore the destination and some of its most popular attractions including McCarthy's Wildlife Sanctuary.The guided tours are so informative, and guests learn the stories of each animal and how they arrived at the Sanctuary. Whereas Busch Sanctuary only cares for animals local to the region, McCarthy's is home to a variety of animals from all corners of the globe including Amur leopards, Bengal Tigers, lions and even a snow leopard. Many of these animals were illegally owned and taken in by the sanctuary as they can't be allowed into the wild.

All of the animals are well cared for and were quite friendly and playful. The jaguar was purring during our entire visit and the beautiful white tiger was rubbing up against the encloser seeking some attention from us. In addition to big cats, the sanctuary also houses exotic birds, lemurs, and a feisty fox.

No trip to Palm Beach would be complete without a shopping spree or stroll along Worth Avenue. High-end boutiques such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Akris line the street. Even if you don't want to shop, it is still a fun experience to window shop and watch the parade of exotic cars that drive up and down the avenue.

It takes a good week to explore the destination, especially if you want to visit numerous cities and attractions. One of my favorite times to visit Florida in general is the spring and fall, as the weather is divine.

To book your West Palm Beach gaycation, visit www.Orbitz.com/pride

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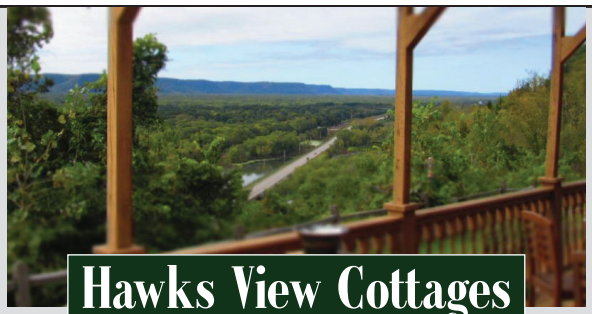

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Our Getaways and Vacations

BY LAVENDER MAGAZINE

Photo by Linda Raines

You see our bylines in this magazine. You know we have great lives like you do. Therefore, we travel like you do.

Or, do we?

Our staff and contributing writers came together to share our stories of where we've been – and where we're going – this and every summer. We even share our favorite destinations in the world.

Here's our picks for our favorite past, present, and future summer getaways. Maybe they're the same as yours!

Brett Burger – New York City

This summer, I'm returning to New York, my favorite vacation. I try to go every few years to see the latest on Broadway, eat as much as I can, and visit some of my best friends. This month I'll be going to see "Company" with Patti LuPone, "Funny Girl," and a few others.

Photo by Brett Burger

Photo by Randy Stern

Randy Stern – Wichita

Two summers ago, I took a road trip that was quite fulfilling and a long time in the works. I drove down to Omaha and Kansas City, but I did not originally plan to head into Kansas. A friend of mine in Wichita invited me to take the extra three-hour drive to that state's largest city. I added the extra night and mileage – and I was not disappointed. It is a very nice city to check out – and a good stopping point if you're driving between Minnesota and Texas.

Linda Raines – The Maldives

My husband and I love to travel, and we've been so lucky to have been able to visit some of the most lovely places – France, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales, Croatia, the Galapagos Islands, Belize, the British and US Virgin Islands. Paris and Venice are two of the most breathtakingly beautiful cities I've ever seen. However, if I had to choose the travel destination that took my breath away the most, it'd be the Maldives. We spent a week on a live-aboard dive boat, and then

Continue on page 26

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several days at the Baros resort which was a bucket list trip for me—an over-the-water bungalow with a private deck where you could jump right into warm, astonishingly clear waters that were every shade of blue and turquoise you could imagine, rays and sea turtles and reef sharks swimming right near you, sugar-white sand, a spa that was almost out of a celebrity magazine, and a private, chef-made dinner on the resort's "Piano Deck" out in the water where we could watch the sunset over the Indian Ocean. It was a trip out of a dream, and we're planning to go back in a year or so.

Barry Leavitt – The East Coast

I love to travel, especially during the summer. Some of my recent trips with friends have been to New York City, Door County and Portland, Oregon. Being a native Bostonian, I also take a trip to visit my East Coast family and friends each summer. For the month of July, I drove east and visited friends and family in the Boston area, Provincetown, New York City, Rochester, NY and Ogunquit, ME. I loved seeing my family and friends, enjoying the ocean, going to a Red Sox game, eating lots of east coast style pizza and LOTS of fresh seafood.

Holly Peterson – Parks Across The Country

There is no better way to spend the summer than exploring parks – city parks, state parks, national parks – I love them all. At the end of May, I wrapped up a six-week road trip where I traveled through Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Georgia. I grew up road-tripping, so I had seen most of these states as a kid, but I'll be the first to admit that those memories are fuzzy at best. On this trip, revisiting state after forgotten state, I was repeatedly struck by how beautiful our country is. The caves

Photo by Holly Peterson

of Kentucky, the swamps of Louisiana, the mountains of Arkansas, the rolling hills of Tennessee, the list goes on.

So that's it. That's the recommendation. Pick a park you've never been to and lose yourself (figuratively, please) for a day. You can leave Minnesota for this experience, but you definitely don't have to. Any choice is a good choice. Go to a city park like Minnehaha Falls or Lebanon Hills or head out of town and try something like Itasca State Park or Voyageurs National Park. Just get outside and remind yourself how beautiful this country can be. ∎

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Minneapolis Comic and Record Store Continues Its Latinx Legacy With New Trans Owner

BY KARISSA STOTTS

On June 30th, Wizard Wax owners Ben Menas and Cal Woods will hand over the keys to artist and educator, Jex Arzayus.

Wizard Wax,commonly referred to as "The Wizard" is a jem of the city, known for its $3 LP bins and variety of 45s, as well as diversity of comics, and Jex Arzayus said he will continue to build off the customer base already established. But, he's also committed to something more.

"As a Latinx transman, I want the store to reflect everything I am. I want it to be queer and BIPoC focused and artistic, and I want people to come into the store and find comics and records they can't find anywhere else. I also want the Wizard to be a hub for queer and BIPoC artists to gather and feel supported," said Jex. He added, "And we'll be a site where you can sign the petition to get community control of the police in Minneapolis. Transphobic violence is at an all-time high and business owners can do their part to create a safe world for everyone."

Ben Menas said he can't think of anyone better to take over ownership of the record and comic book store. "Jex is 100 percent the reason why it wasn't put on the market and shopped around to the highest bidder. Jex is someone who I want to have in the neighborhood and do business with and work together," he said.

Before the pandemic Jex and Ben met as vendors at TimeBomb, both buying and selling toys, records, and clothes for their rented spaces, both dreaming of becoming business owners someday, but not sure of the path to get there.

"I've always been entrepreneurial and business-minded. There were many times when an invention would happen and I'd think, 'Damn, I had that idea years ago.' But I never knew it could become a reality because of my credit score and inability to get a loan. As a brown transman, I never thought I'd be able to own an actual store of my own, said Jex.

According to a local business publication, less than 3 % of Asian, Latino, and Black adults in the metro area own businesses, which is less than half the rate of ownership among white adults. Hispanic ownership in Minneapolis is

Photo by Karissa Stotts

far lower than the national average.

Before getting into the record business, Menas worked at Summit Brewery for 14 years, working his way through the packaging line and production floor to become the canning supervisor. Although he liked his career and continues to drink Summit to this day, he said he always dreamed of carrying on the family legacy of owning a store like his father who started a television repair company in Texas. He recalls sitting in his father's store after school and dreaming of owning his own store too one day.

"When the pandemic hit, I was surviving solely on a big record collection that I purchased to resell online," said Menas. "I was always hanging around TimeBomb trying to learn the business and that's when Cal Woods approached me to see if I wanted to go in with him and buy the empty store around the corner. We compiled collections and after 4 or 5 months, we turned what was once a massage parlor into Wizard Wax."

Then in May of 2021, Menas was offered the opportunity to buy out TimeBomb as the sole owner. Menas said, "I didn't have time to run both stores, so I knew I needed to sell Wizard Wax and here was Jex always hanging around TimeBomb just like I always did. I loved that I could pass off a business specifically to him. He's a nerd like me and not phased by anything. He is tough and will always have my back. That fact that we are both Brown is a great bonus to the community".

Wizard Wax will officially be open under the new management July 2nd. The hours of the store will be 12-6 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday. ▮

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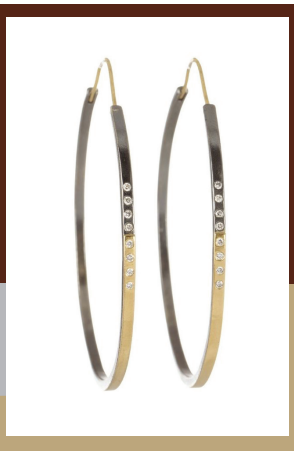

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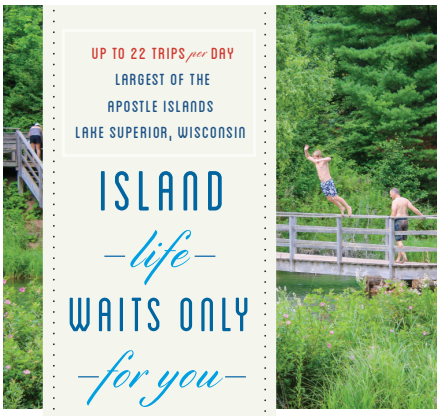

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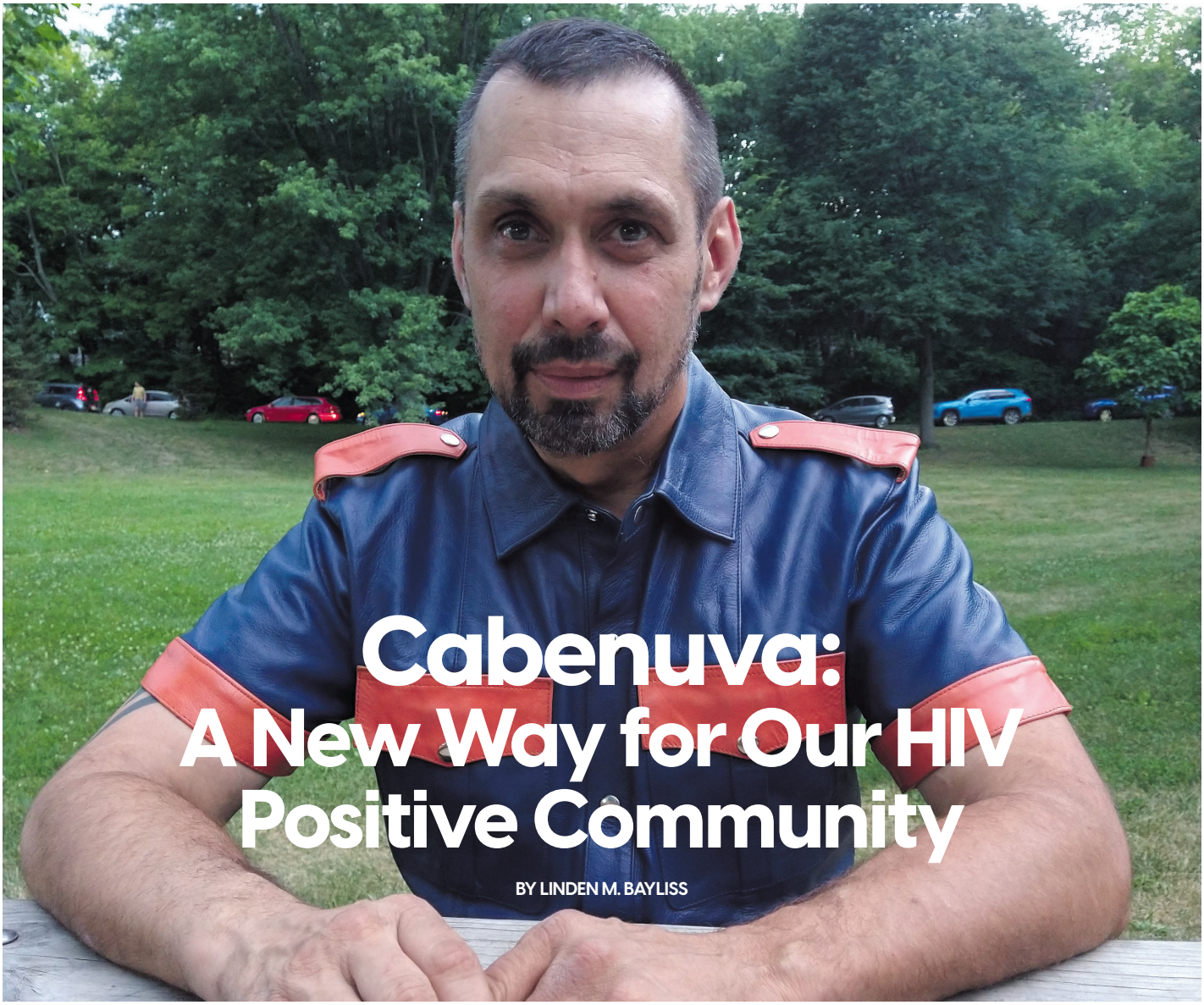

Cabenuva: A New Way for Our HIV Positive Community

BY LINDEN M. BAYLISS

Photo courtesy of Christopher Vadner

HIV/AIDS treatment has come a long way in the past 30 years.

Back in the early days, treatment required folks to take anywhere from three to 30 pills several times per day just to have a fighting chance. Today, the most popular form of HIV/AIDS treatment exists in the form of "combination pills," which combine one or more drugs known as "antiretrovirals" into one single pill per day.

But now, as of January 2021, there is a new way, an even easier way: the first ever FDA-approved injectable HIV regimen that only has to be taken once a month or every other month, Cabenuva.

I spoke with a well-known member of our leather community who was not only a part of the drug's clinical trial in our state, but was also the first person in Minnesota to be put on Cabenuva as a bimonthly regimen.

Meet Minneapolis' Christopher Vadner, also known as "Boy Christopher," one of only three people currently taking Cabenuva in Minnesota. Vadner is Minnesota Leather Pride's 2018 "Leatherboy" title holder (you may have "met" him before in a previous issue of *Lavender*, his title-holding photo was featured in May 2018). Vadner is a Minnesota native, raised in the northern suburb of Andover, and was first diagnosed with HIV in July of 2012.

When asked about his journey with treatment, Vadner describes his initial experience taking combination pills. "Bed sweats, and nightmares like crazy," were the most common side effects he notes. "I didn't know where I was sometimes," Vadner says, "Sometimes I had to get up at night and change my clothes 'cause I was totally wet. … I felt like I was swimming in my own bed, you know." Vadner says he dealt with the night sweats for about two years and it was a constant struggle for him to want to keep taking medication at all, understandably.

Another combination pill later and Vadner noticed something interesting in *POZ* magazine, a New York-based publication for the HIV positive community: an article about a new injectable medication for HIV/AIDS set to come out in about three years, but it was not yet FDA approved.

"'I can't promise you, Chris,'" is what his doctor told him when Vadner shared his new discovery. The reality is that some drugs don't pass the trials, and Cabenuva hadn't gotten that far yet. Nonetheless, Vadner couldn't have been more excited about the possibility.

"I hated taking pills," Vadner says, and not just because of the side effects. He told his doctor at the time, "The biggest thing for me, if I could take this one drug, I don't have to worry about carrying drugs with me when I go on my trips, or anyone asking me questions or snooping in my bags or anything." Vadner says the stigma against people who are HIV positive is alive and well, and being able to tell people about his posi-

Continue on page 32

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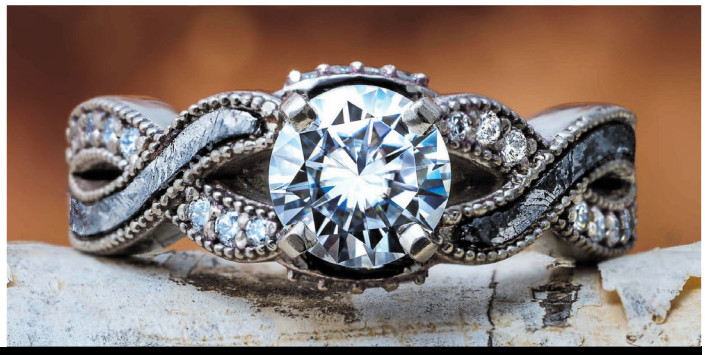

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tive status on his own time and in his own way is something that is very important to him.

In October 2021, Vadner's doctor finally gave him the call he had been waiting for.

Before Christmas, he was starting the shots.

When I asked him what it was like to start the trials, Vadner said there were a few things he was not expecting, but that overall it was a very positive experience, not a scary one. Vadner chuckles as he talks about being a little taken aback when he was rolling up his sleeve, ready for the shot, and the doctor said, "'No, sorry Chris, pull your pants down.'" Turns out the injection just goes into each side of the hips (whew!), something he soon became used to.

He says that throughout the entire trial process staff were consistently checking in on him and asking him how he was feeling, physically and emotionally. Vadner graduated from the trial after seven months and continues to get his shots, but now only every other month.

Now that he has grown accustomed to his new lifestyle, Vadner says he really wants to show HIV positive folks in the leather community, Minnesota, and the world at large that now, "you don't have to worry about missing a dose," or "taking a pill every single day." "It's an easy way to do it, and a safe way to do it," he explains. Vadner says his levels have been looking awesome since beginning the drug as he is no longer forgetting to take pills or skipping his medication due to bad side effects.

Vadner hopes to lead by example, blazing new trails for the betterment of his community.

"As the Leatherboy of Minnesota, I wanna say we should learn to try new things in our community. It's a new adventure to be 'pill free' and it's a safe thing. It doesn't hurt to try something new." Vadner wants to remind people that "… if you don't like doing it, you can switch back."

He also wants to encourage all people who are sexually active to get tested regularly for HIV, no matter who your partners are.

Vadner says he is happy to personally answer any questions anyone has about Cabenuva or to go more in depth about his experience. The best way to contact the Leatherboy is to shoot him a message on Facebook, he says. He also recommends talking to your health care provider, Red Door Clinic, The Aliveness Project, or Rainbow Health in St. Paul (where he volunteers) to learn more. ▮

Red Door Clinic: *www.reddoorclinic.org*
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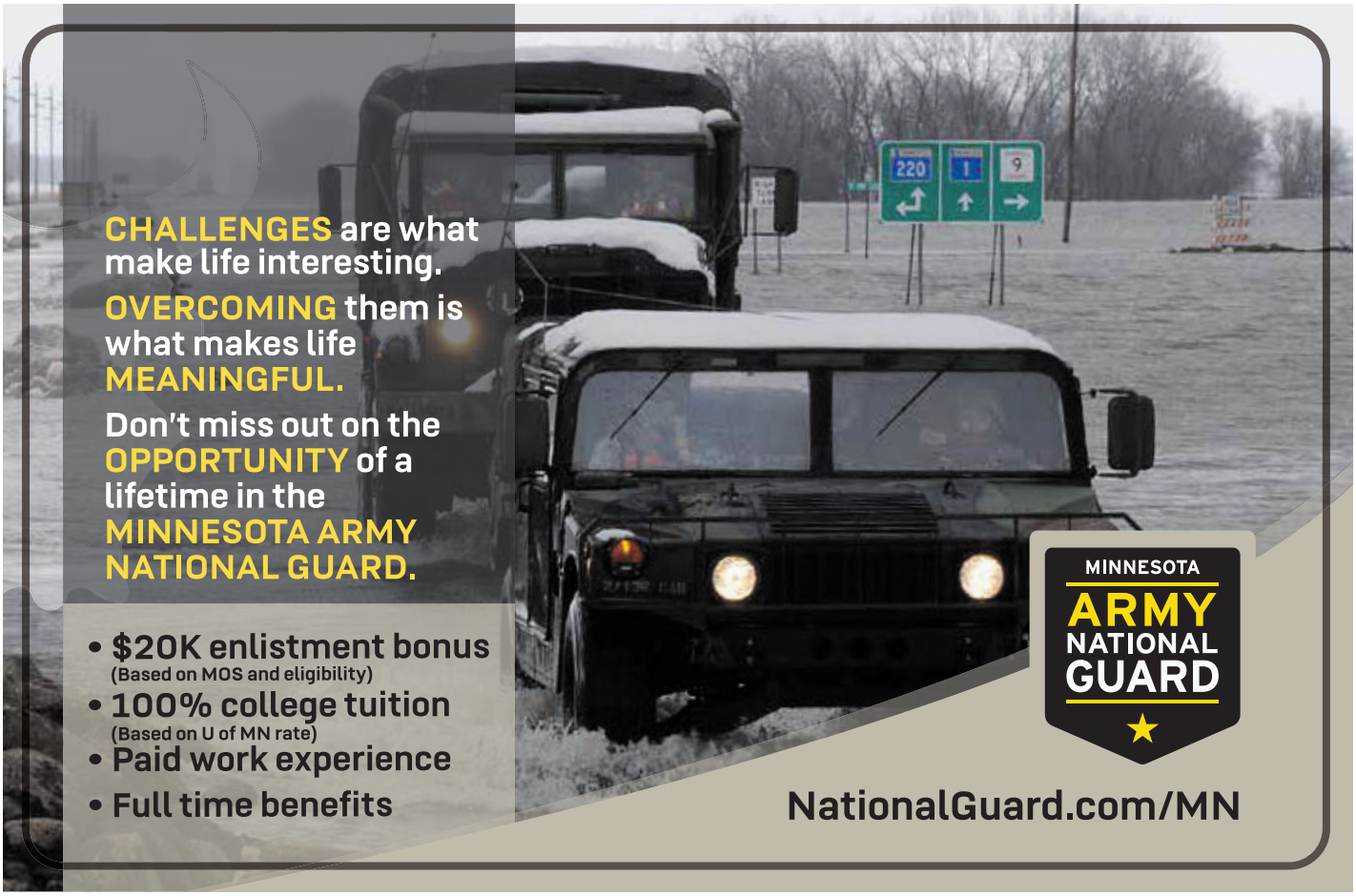

What Does AARP Do For Us?

BY RANDY STERN

When you pay your annual dues to the AARP, what do you get as an LGBTQ member?

The organization formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons has been the leading advocacy group for older adults since 1958. It is now the largest such group offering not just advocacy for legislation pertaining the lives of older adults in this country, but benefits to its members.

A small annual membership fee unlocks a lot of advantages to its members. Not just information of legislation the AARP is working to push through Federal and State governments, but for its members to take advantage of discounts on everything from healthcare to travel – and so forth.

As you pass by the Twin Cities Pride festival at Loring Park, you might be happy to see the AARP booth there. However, you are probably wondering if they have anything specific for LGBTQ older adults.

In a sense, yes and no. The idea that AARP welcomes LGBTQ members is perhaps to provide a level field of benefits and advocacy that is spread across a diverse spectrum of older adults. In other words, benefits equal equity.

For example, pharmacy benefits are critical towards maintaining the cost of prescriptions. A discount provided by OptumRx might be offer the lowest price on certain prescription medicines compared to current rates through Medicare or your current health insurance plan.

As a community, we love to travel. There are a total of 119 discounts available to AARP members to take advantage of. They feature discounts at hotel chains, rental car agencies, and cruise lines. The discounts available to members also include automotive services, wireless services, health and wellness, shopping, restaurants, insurance, entertainment, financial services, real estate, and more.

In addition, AARP localizes their efforts through state and city offices. Here in Minnesota, AARP offers localized opportunities through online and in-person events designed to inform older adults on advocacy efforts, as well as to connect members together. The same level of efforts is available through their Twin Cities-based programs. One such localized effort is through their AARP Driver Safety program, promoting safer driving for older adults.

Photo courtesy of BigStock/lucigerma

Also, AARP offers free tax preparation locally, as well as offer resources for better living in your area.

You can also connect through monthly meetings of the AARP's local chapters in Minneapolis, Duluth, Rochester, Moorhead, Augusta (WI), Hayward (WI), Sioux Falls – to name a few in the Upper Midwest. It is a way to catch up on what's new locally with the AARP, as well as connect with members and volunteers.

Even though these service appear to be universally available to all members, the AARP does recognize that LGBTQ older adults are part of the growing aging population in this country. However, they do not offer anything specific that caters to our community at this time. Yet, they do align themselves with currently available organizations and services that interface with LGBTQ older adults.

We asked Father Harry Hartigan, one of our 2022 *Lavender* Magazine Community Award recipients and advocate for LGBTQ older adults, his thoughts on where AARP stands with our community. "AARP [Minnesota] has been a leader at Twin Cities Pride (as one of the anchors of the "Generations of Pride" section at the Festival in Loring Park) since 2013 or 2014," explained Hartigan. "The work we have done locally was recognized by AARP National and they sent a huge team of folks to Twin Cities Pride in 2018. I firmly believe that AARP wants to be diverse and inclusive and their presence at [Twin Cities Pride] is testament to this commitment."

When you log onto the AARP website you will see their commitment towards being inclusive. There is an LGBTQ page that talks about our people, our history, and which benefits work with us. We suspect that there will be more to come, as our LGBTQ older adults continue to demand for services that are relevant and supportive of our aging population.

While you are getting invitations to join AARP before you turn 50, you may want to check out what they offer. Peruse through the benefits and at which age certain discounts will come into play. Log on to aarp.org to see what they offer you. ▮

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Quitting Tobacco

BY KASSIDY TARALA

Photo courtesy of BigStock/Creative Cat Studio

I remember when I was growing up, adults always talked about tobacco and how it was disproportionately advertised among young people, with packaging of major cigarette brands even mimicking that of gum and candy wrappers. There were anti-smoking commercials on Nickelodeon, and restaurants were increasingly removing their smoking sections. It seemed that everyone was on the same page: that big tobacco is harmful to young people. But this messaging neglected to mention something: that commercial tobacco products are impacting the LGBTQ+ community, too.

"LGBTQ+ people still smoke at a higher rate than the general population. Of the 2,8000 LGBTQ+ Minnesotans who participated in our most recent Voices of Health survey, we found that 33 percent currently smoke—more than double the broader population—and 20 percent recently vaped, compared to 4.9 percent in the broader population," says Jeremy Hanson Willis, CEO of Rainbow Health.

For more than ten years, Rainbow Health has conducted community-based research on the health of LGBTQ+ communities throughout Minnesota.

"Tobacco use and vaping are higher in LGBTQ+ communities because we are targeted by tobacco and vaping companies with marketing for their products," Hanson Willis explains. "In addition, our community also faces many other overlapping health issues such as mental health and chemical health. For example, our latest Voices of Health research found that 46 percent of transgender and nonbinary people felt anxious or on edge almost daily. Many of those people facing severe mental distress and trauma use tobacco and vaping to manage their stress."

He adds that "tobacco companies and vaping companies primarily target LGBTQ+ people in direct media advertising and event sponsorships. They are among the most sophisticated marketing industries and spend a lot to understand and market to populations with higher tobacco and nicotine-use rates. There is also a lot of tobacco and vaping cross-marketing to BIPOC people, many of whom are also LGBTQ+ and are exposed to even greater marketing."

Jen Cash, acting program manager for the Minnesota Department of Health's Commercial Tobacco Prevention and Control Program, says that "as with all historically marginalized communities, social determinants of health have played a big role. Decades of discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, education, and health care have negatively impacted the physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ communities."

There is a long history of tobacco advertising in LGBTQ+ publications, Cash says, which has often been in the form of full-page, full-color back cover ads with high visibility. "Those same tobacco companies also sponsor community events like Pride and have a history of handing out free product samples and other giveaways in bars that have been safe spaces for LGBTQ+ folks to gather and celebrate," she says.

Hanson Willis points out that tobacco use, like many other health issues impacting LGBTQ+ communities, will only be solved by achieving greater equity in our health care system.

"When 27 percent of LGBTQ+ folks in our survey reported needing a doctor in the past year but didn't seek care because they feared mistreatment, and when 26 percent reported being refused care because they were LGBTQ+, we have a big problem," he says. "We need every clinic, every hospital, every treatment center to be a safe and welcoming place for LGBTQ+ Minnesotans to get the health care they need."

Cash adds, "Commercial tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable disease, disability, and death, and the impacts are consistently greater in communities that have experienced social, economic, and health-related inequities."

While progress has been made, Cash says that there is still more to do. "We are grateful to be partnering with organizations like Rainbow Health on community-based initiatives like the Voices of Health Survey of LGBTQ+ Health in Minnesota and increasing awareness of and accessibility to services like Quit Partner," she says.

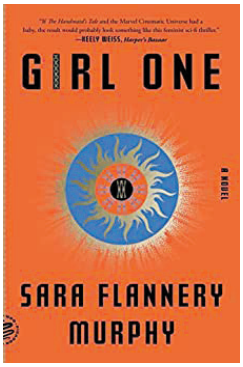
Unsurprisingly (if you watched Nickelodeon in the '90s), LGBTQ people in our survey were less likely to be smokers as they aged, with 24 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds smoking compared to 19 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds, 11 percent of 35- to 44-year-olds, 4 percent of 45- to 54-year-olds, and 6 percent of 55+-year-olds. Young LGBTQ people were also more likely to be current e-cigarette users, with 27 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds currently vaping, compared to 18 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds and 5 percent of 45+-year-olds.

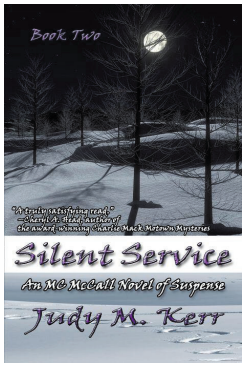
"Tobacco use is higher among BIPOC generally," Hanson Willis adds. "In our research, 24 percent of Black LGBTQ+ people smoke compared to 16 percent of white LGBTQ+ people."

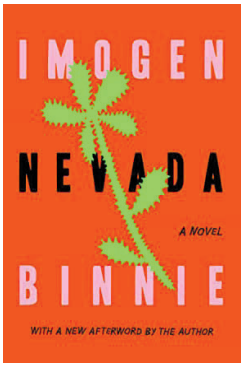
Despite the alarming statistics, Cash is confident that, with the help of the Minnesota Department of Health's free services, Minnesotans who would like help to quit using commercial tobacco products have support.

"LGBTQ+ folks haven't always had good experiences with health care providers and systems and need to be able to trust programs like this," she says. "Quit Partner has developed inclusive programming that includes knowledgeable coaches and support materials dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community."

Quit Partner can be reached 24/7 by calling 1-800-QUIT-NOW or visiting QuitPartnerMN.com. ▮







GIRL ONE

Sara Flanner Murphy
MCD Picador
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Josephine Morrow was the first Miracle Baby–"Girl One"–conceived in the mind of Joseph Bellinger and brought to term without the taint of male DNA–the first successful instance of human parthenogenesis. Josephine, her mother, and eight successive mother-daughter pairs lived sequestered on Bellanger's Vermont Homestead–until the fire. That was 1972; now, in 1994, Josephine's mother has disappeared, their post- Homestead dwelling a charred and empty ruin. Josephine hits the road, seeking her scattered, reclusive sisters, discovering hidden powers among them, piecing together the truth about their origins, their childhoods, and what actually happened to "father" Bellanger, reported to have died in the Homestead conflagration. Have Josephine's own scientific attempts to further his work been an homage, or a misguided attempt emulate a madman?

SILENT SERVICE: AN MCCALL NOVEL OF SUSPENSE (2)

Judy M. Kerr
LaunchPoint Press
$18.95

Even the strong may be brought low by grief. Postal Inspector MC McCall falls back on the demon vodka following the murder of her partner Barb scant months earlier. Now assigned to a widespread and dangerous opioid narcotics investigation, MC's obsession with tracking down Barb's murderer–despite warnings from her higher-ups–overrides reason, putting at risk her years of dedicated service. From Barb to the bottle and back, MC perseveres, finding threads that begin to weave into a tighter, increasingly lethal whole. MC realizes she's flawed, yet it is her professionalism and sensitivity to shadings and nuances that ignite the explosive ending to the case. Minnesotan Kerr retired from the postal service after more than thirty-eight years of Federal service; she knows whereof she writes.

NEVADA

Imogen Binnie
MCD x FSG Originals
$17

Originally published in 2013 and now a cult classic rereleased by FSG Originals with a new Afterword by the author, *Nevada* follows the road-trip of thirtyish, disaffected trans woman Maria Grifiths. After a breakup with girlfriend Steph, she "borrows" Steph's car, leaves her bookshop job and New York City altogether, heads west to end up in Star City, Nevada. There, in a Wal-Mart, she meets James, a conflicted youth–Trans-yes? Trans-no?–who reminds her of her younger self. Will she help or harm him? Can she do either? Their desultory coming together then apart, moths tattering their wings against a dimming light, is electric, yet inconclusive, as the author says in the dedication, "…not a happy book." In its very non-ness lies its solace.

A DEADLY COVENANT: A DETECTIVE KUBU MYSTERY

Michael Stanley White
Sun Books
$26.96

A second prequel in the Detective Kubu Mysteries, *Covenant* is more than a thriller, offering insight into how large (Kubu means "hippopotamus"), shy, intelligent David Bengu was shaped through circumstance and willpower into the renowned detective of the later books. Here he's sent to assist pathologist Ian McGregor concerning an aged Bushman skeleton unearthed in the construction of a pipeline in the northern Okavango Delta. But more skeletons are revealed, and the case becomes entangled in accusations of local corruption, a wrathful river spirit, and worldwide outrage at the Bushman massacre. A Bushman is jailed for local killings. Kubu, despite personal insecurities concerning love and social skills, sets his keen mind to work, absorbs, solves – gains confidence in handling police procedure, single-malt whiskey, and love. ∎

Rolling Down The Mighty Mississippi

BY RANDY STERN

We are fortunate to have the Great River in our backyard.

The mighty Mississippi River starts in Minnesota and flows down towards the Gulf of Mexico along some of the most historic parts of this country. You can recite its port cities by heart. You may have already visited them multiple times.

Not a lot of attention has been given to the section of the Mississippi that flows alongside the state of Iowa. Maybe amongst us who live in this part of the country. Still, if you survey anyone who knows anything about the Mississippi River, there seems to be a knowledge gap between the Twin Cities and St. Louis.

Keokuk, IA. Photos by Randy Stern

If you know something about Dubuque, the Quad Cities and the river towns in southeastern Iowa, then you're in for a new version of this run along the Great River Road. For those who have no idea that this section of the Mississippi River exists in your conscience – fasten your seatbelts!

You may want to fasten your seatbelts for this journey. It's going to be exciting. At least the car is.

As I was planning this journey, I was thinking I should drive something nice and economical. My partners at Toyota thought otherwise. They decided to get me a 2022 GR86 for this river run.

The GR86 is a 2+2 sports coupe developed and produced in collaboration with Subaru. A 2.4-liter Boxer four-cylinder engine powers this latest edition to the Gazoo Racing sub-brand. My blue car only has rear wheel drive coupled to an automatic transmission. This should be an exciting run along the river, right? Let's see if we're right about this car choice…

At the crack of dawn, I pointed the Toyota sports coupe down US Highway 52 through Rochester and Decorah. That stretch between the two cities can get pretty exciting, even though you are running through some pure southeastern Minnesota farmland. Once you entered into Iowa, you are right on the bluffs of the Mississippi River.

The roads are good – make that, great! As long as you follow the Great River Road signage, you may never ask whether Iowa has roads like these ever again. They offer twists, turns, elevation changes – perfect for something like the GR86.

My overnight stay for the first few nights is the elegant and historic Hotel Blackhawk in downtown Davenport. As part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, this lovely hotel offered the right accommodations as a hub for all activities while I am along the river

Friday was spent in the Quad Cities themselves. This cluster of four cities – Davenport, Bettendorf, Moline, and Rock Island – serve as a perfect hub for all activities in both Iowa and Illinois that are river-based and beyond.

I wanted to see what the LGBTQ community in the Quad Cities looked like. They have a few resources available to locals and the community beyond the Quad Cities. Based in Rock Island on the Illinois side of the river, CLOCK Inc. serves as the region's community center.

The space itself is located a few miles away from the Mississippi River in a shopping center. Don't let the looks and location fool you, even though you can get a public transit bus to its doorstep every 30 minutes between downtown Rock Island and Blackhawk College.

Once inside, you are treated to a very comprehensive community center. CLOCK offer services for youth, the trans community – including counseling, library, a computer center, and a series of trans clothing closets to match their gender expression. The latter also includes a closet for binders. You cannot help noticing the stage to the right of the main reception desk, along with booths, tables, and chairs.

CLOCK is quite unlike a lot of community centers I have visited. Perhaps it is because of the size of the space – a former full-size beauty salon and spa. However, Chase Norris, the Executive Director of CLOCK, Inc. describes their location as "[a] safe place for people to be."

Adam Peters, CLOCK, Inc.'s Director of Operations adds that "[t]he authenticity that we see here from our community is quite incredible. And we're trying to do all sorts of different things here to make sure that people know we're open. We're here for you and we're here to support you in your life. So, [CLOCK, Inc. has] support groups, [and] we have the counseling here. We have the closet space with the clothing. We're trying to do all sorts of things just to make sure people know, 'You are welcome here. And, you're welcome in this community.'"

In downtown Moline, The Project offers a vast array of health-related services for the LGBTQ community, including people with HIV/AIDS. From counseling to primary care, The Project is a one-stop space emphasizing care of our community for the Quad Cities region.

There are only two LGBTQ bars left in the Quad Cities: Mary's on 2nd and the Varieties Nightclub, both in downtown Davenport. At one time,

2022 Toyota GR86

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there were four, three of which were on the Iowa side of the river. Mary's has a patio that can be lively – and quiet.

While these resources are available year-round, one should not miss the Annual QC Unity Pride Parade, held this past June at Schwiebert Park in Rock Island. They just added a Fall Pride event at Le Claire Park in Davenport on September 23-24. Perhaps a trip to that event – or, next year's June Pride event – might be in order.

After a full day in the Quad Cities, it was time to discover the river south of it. My goal was to make it all the way through to Keokuk, the last city in Iowa before the Mississippi River borders Missouri. That was accomplished via both the main highway down (US Highway 61) and via the Great River Road Byway. What I found were river cities that have plenty of life in them and history that could not be ignored. For example, the original Fort Madison still stands – I will leave you to your own historical interpretation. In Keokuk and in ports along the Mississippi, a riverboat is moored to remind us on how one used to traverse this great river.

LoPiez. Davenport IA

The following morning took me to the Illinois side of the great river. My starting point is the new Interstate 74 bridge that has replaced an 87-year-old structure that has been in bad shape in recent years. It was to the point where the then-Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood said in 2012 that the old bridge was the "worst" he's seen.

Back in 2018, I drove across that bridge coming back from an event Joliet, Illinois. LaHood was absolutely spot on regarding the condition and safety of the old bridge.

The new bridge opened up formally at the end of 2021. It was a dream for Quad Citians to enjoy a smoother, quicker way to get from Bettendorf to Moline. The Toyota GR86 responded to the call to cross the I-74 bridge to catch a Sunday breakfast in downtown Moline.

Meli's is a pancake house a couple of blocks from the John Deere Pavilion. High ceilings, great parking, and good food helped start a new leg of the journey.

That leg followed the Illinois version of the Great River Road, proclaimed as the National Route on that side of the Mississippi River. It follows Illinois Highway 84 from Interstate 80 up towards Galena.

The route has its prettier sections, with the river not far off, with trees lining up the road. Then, it opens up to some rolling farmland as you inch closer to US Highway 20 and Galena.

What makes Galena stand out more is the sheer number of businesses along its Main Street that are LGBTQ owned and operated. In fact, Visit Galena was one of the sponsors of their Pride festival in town. They helped promote LGBTQ-owned businesses at Pride.

One of them was the Galena Bakehouse, a place where you can get everything from bakery goods, bread, and some food to go. Try their empanadas. They're absolutely delicious!

Several doors up Main Street is Galena Apothecary. They offer an assortment of vintage and contemporary gifts that will compliment any home. The Neighborhood is a cool clothing boutique for youthful people of any gender expression. Not to mention, they have some stickers and other knickknacks that are LGBTQ themed.

In all, Visit Galena listed 15 business and community partners that are either LGBTQ owned and operated or supportive of the LGBTQ community in Galena. They just happen to be up and down Main Street.

My final night on the road trip was spent in Dubuque at the TownePlace Suites by Marriott. It was not only the newest place to stay in this northeastern Iowa city by the Mississippi River – it might as well be the best.

What makes this new hotel property stand out is its location. The Millwork District in Dubuque is undertaking a rebirth from the shell of old factories and warehouses next to downtown. Restaurants, bars, breweries, distilleries, retail, and other businesses have been occupying both older and new structures within this section of Dubuque bringing new life to the city.

In meeting with some local LGBTQ folks, I got the sense that Dubuque is transforming in other ways. Upon driving through town, there are signs of LGBTQ life there – literally. Rainbow flags are flying in a few parts of town. Something that was never even thought of, according to the people I talked to in Dubuque.

There was a Pride Picnic held in Dubuque at the end of June at the Multicultural Family Center. Yet, Key City Pride was not held in 2022. No mention by any of the people whom I talked to in town knew anything as to why it was it did not occur.

However, if any LGBTQ person in North East Iowa needed support, one would have to travel to CLOCK, Inc. for such support and community. It is an hour-and-a-half drive away to seek the support CLOCK, Inc. offers to that part of the Mississippi River.

However, Norris indicated that it is not unusual for LGBTQ people to find support down in the Quad Cities from afar. "I've had a middle schooler come from Iowa City for groups," Norris explained. "Parents bring them an hour, just so their kid has a support system that's outside of their school and family. And we've had people come from some of the lower suburbs. We've had some of the smaller towns outside of Peoria. We're it." Peters added that they had someone come from Rockford, Illinois to find support.

My last leg home began along the Mississippi River, following the Great River Byway. Behind the wheel of the Toyota GR86, I began to calculate in my head all of the experiences I had. These included the conversations I was engaged with in Rock Island, Davenport, Galena, and Dubuque. Yet, I was distracted by the landscape – rolling farmland, river bluffs lined with trees, and vistas that were completely breathtaking.

Throughout this journey, I can confirm that there is intelligent LGBTQ life along the Mississippi River from the Minnesota state line down towards St. Louis. You cannot fly over this part of the mighty river and ignore it altogether.

If you do such a road trip, I suggest taking the Great River Road Byway. Just follow the signs and you will be treated to some great vistas of the river. If you happen to have a car like the Toyota GR86, you might enjoy some of the fun twists and turns along the way.

If you do take this trip, remember that there is intelligent LGBTQ life along this section of the Mississippi River. They're friendly and welcoming, too! ▮

The Mississippi River. Guttenberg, IA

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